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DUMP MARCOS

When Senator Paul Laxalt, acting as President Reagan's personal envoy, suggested to Ferdinand Marcos that he hold early elections, the answer was an unequivocal no. When George Will made the same suggestion to the Philippine president a few weeks later, on the Sunday morning program "This Week with David Brinkley," Marcos was warming up to the idea. "I am decided that with these arguments coming from the opposition, and now in this show and interview, I'm ready. I'm ready to call a snap election," Marcos told the stunned panelists.

Many viewers in this country saw Marcos's announcement as a sign that he was giving in to demands from the U.S., and edging a little bit closer to democratic rule. But members of the Philippine opposition know their wily dictator far better. The promise of an election in fact means very little. Asked to explain his plan, Marcos said during the interview that the "snap election" should take place within 60 days. This would give the opposition little time to unite behind a single candidate, raise funds, and mount an effort to keep Marcos from buying or stealing the election, as he has often done in the past.

Since the television broadcast, Marcos has made several minor concessions that appear more significant than they are. He has said he will hold the election on February 7 instead of January 17. He has said he will resign, as the Philippine Constitution requires before a special election, but will not leave office. In the next few weeks Marcos will probably accredit Namfrel, the organization of volunteer poll watchers that was responsible for the relative fairness of the 1984 parliamentary election. But he is still demanding a list of the poll watchers' names so that he can bring the organization under his control. Between now and the election, everything Marcos does will be calculated carefully to make it appear he is trying to be fair. But as Senate Intelligence Committee staff members who recently visited the Philippines put it in a rare public report, "Marcos, at this point, intends to do whatever is necessary to ensure a favorable outcome in the next election."

Nevertheless, the various opposition groups are giving the election their all, in the hope that Marcos can be pressured into meeting enough of their demands that he will lose. At the moment they are concerned with selecting a presidential candidate, who will probably be Corazon Aquino or former senator Salvador Laurel. Because of his isolation from reality, which a number of recent visitors have commented upon, Marcos may not realize how few real supporters he has left. Most of his people are fed up with a failing economy, internal repression, and growing violence fostered by the communist National People's Army (NPA). There is some hope that he will miscalculate and lose the election. But in the event that he manages to affirm his mandate, using "his considerable power to rig the elections at both the national and the local levels," as the Senate Intelligence Committee envisions, the United States will have to consider options other than that of continuing to prop up this sad, sagging tyrant.

If present trends continue, Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage estimates that the NPA will reach a strategic stalemate with the Philippine army in three to five years. Senator Dave Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, thinks two or three years would be an optimistic estimate. Whatever their potential strength, the guerrillas have emerged as a real and present danger since Benigno Aquino was assassinated in 1983. There are now estimated to be more than 15,000 armed fighters in nearly all of the 73 Philippine provinces. The NPA is not currently backed by Moscow, and it apparently prefers to remain nonaligned. But the Soviets are, to say the least, interested.

Marcos has us in a bind. Since he is the one fighting the NPA, the argument goes, we must step up military aid in order to keep them from winning. But giving Marcos more guns won't help. His army is badly organized, mismanaged, and riddled with corruption. His solution to the insurgency problem seems to be wishing it away. "They are surrendering in droves," he recently told Ted Koppel on "Nightline," insisting that he can squash the NPA within a year. His own generals have called that assessment ridiculous. In truth, there is little Marcos can do to oppose the guerrillas, since their rise is a direct result of 20 years of his repression. As long as he stays in office, while postponing military, political, and economic reforms,

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the chances of an eventual NPA victory will improve.

If the guerrillas succeed in waging a protracted civil war or in seizing power, it will be a tragedy for the 50 million citizens of the Philippines. It would also be a tragedy of sorts for the United States. Our two largest military bases outside U.S. borders—the Clark air base and the naval station at Subic Bay—are located in the Philippines. They are essential to our strategic capability in Southeast Asia. If we lost them (the leases expire in 1989, subject to renegotiation), we would be forced to monitor Soviet activity in the region from bases in Hawaii and Japan.

With the exception of Jerry Falwell, reliable friend to tyrants in trouble, even most conservatives realize where the Philippines are headed if Marcos remains in power. Although the Reagan administration waited until the eleventh hour to get worried about the situation, it has backed the International Monetary Fund's recent decision to cut off payments on loans until Marcos breaks up sugar and coconut monopolies run by his cronies, which have helped wreck the economy. Even Marcos's friends are bailing out, transferring hundreds of millions in assets to the U.S. (See "Marcos's Nest Egg," October 7.) Sources in the CIA, the Pentagon, and the State Department have all been hinting darkly that Marcos's plight is far more serious than anyone knows.

"The chances for a constitutional succession could be improved if Marcos died suddenly, as opposed to a lingering period of incapacitation," the Senate Intelligence Committee wrote in the conclusion to its recent report. Indeed, the best solution would be if Marcos would agree to die right away. But we can't count on his cooperation in this matter either. Rumors of his ill health and impending death from kidney failure have been greatly exaggerated for more than 20 years. Senator Durenberger recently proposed what would be an equally workable solution: that Marcos resign. Unfortunately, it is equally unlikely.

It's time to do more than indicate our displeasure to Marcos. Unless by some miracle he holds and wins a fair election, we should pressure him into quitting. One form of pressure, of course, is economic. If the U.S. cut off military and other aid (increased to $70 million this year), other countries and private investors would no doubt follow suit by cutting off all new loans. Without foreign investments, Marcos would lose his tenuous hold on the monopolies whose powerful leaders are still standing by him.

Senator Bill Bradley recently suggested a more novel approach to getting rid of Marcos in a *New York Times* Op-Ed article: offer him safe passage and sanctuary in the U.S. One thing keeping Marcos from relinquishing power may be his fear of punishment for his crimes. It is estimated that he and his wife have plundered one billion dollars from a country that suffers from desperate poverty. He might well be attracted to the idea of nursing his kidneys by the swimming pools of his cronies, who are already packing their bags for California. This conjures unpleasant memories about our solicitude to the fallen shah, but it's likely that Marcos's angry victims would be glad simply to be rid of him.

Indeed, it's useful to remember why the situation in the Philippines is not like Iran, or Nicaragua. The country, which was our only actual colony, still has an abiding love for the United States and a powerful democratic tradition. Many Filipinos would like to see the nation become the 51st state. By supporting Marcos, we have sorely tested this gratitude. Still, there seems to be widespread public support for an American military presence, and strong anti-Soviet sentiment. We don't want to antagonize the democratic forces by supporting an inept and corrupt tyrant past his time. We should reach out to the opposition now, and make clear to Marcos that a truly fair election is his last chance to bow out gracefully.

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